



**TOBIAS SMOLLETT**  
1721-1771

## TOBIAS SMOLLETT AND THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE

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It can be truly said of Tobias Smollett that he was great because of, and not in spite of, his training as a physician, for it was through the physician's eyes that Smollett saw his world.

As a boy, he did not appear to have had any distinct urge to study medicine, and his entrance into the study of medicine was largely accidental. When Smollett was two years of age, his father died, leaving his mother with three children entirely dependent upon his grandfather, Sir James Smollett. At a later date, when the time came for a decision as to his career, it was decided that Tobias should enter a profession, because his elder brother was already in the Army. Smollett was, therefore, sent to the University of Glasgow. Here it was that he made friends with many students who were studying medicine and, since it was necessary for him eventually to earn his living, this profession seemed to him as good as any. The decision having been made, he was apprenticed to Dr. John Gordon, a prominent surgeon in Glasgow. Dr. Gordon had several noted apprentices, among whom were William Smellie, who has been called the father of modern obstetrics, and later, Dr. John Moore, the biographer of Smollett. Smollett had his "ups" and "downs" in the favor of Dr. Gordon, who at one time wrote of him as "a bubbly-nosed callant with the stane in his pouch", but, on other occasions, referred to him as a good apprentice. Smollett, in turn, wrote of Gordon, "I met Dr. Gordon, a patriot of truly noble spirit who is the father of the linen manufactory of Glasgow and was a great promotor of the city work-house, infirmary and other works of public utility. Had he lived in ancient Rome, he would have been honored with a statue at the public expense." Smollett studied anatomy and medicine under the professors at the University, and says that he also read some surgery. Of his other medical studies we are not informed, but we presume that, like other apprentices of his day, he acted as errand boy, gave clysters, spread plasters, mixed potions, and bled patients.

When the apprenticeship was finished and he was looking about for a place in which to settle, his grandfather, Sir James, died, leav-

ing the young doctor both penniless and free. Smollett seized this as an opportunity to see the world, and set out for London with a double purpose, first, to get his play "The Regicide" produced, and, second, to obtain a berth in the Royal Navy as a surgeon's mate. He failed of the former, and very nearly missed the latter. After spending most of his money in bribing the wrong patrons, he was finally directed to take the examinations of the Board of Surgeons. His description of these examinations is most interesting. It appeared that the most important qualification which could be brought before this Board was the fee of about eighteen shillings. The examination was oral, only four questions were asked, and of these but two were pertinent to the work of a surgeon's mate. Smollett says that the remainder of the time was occupied in airing the private dissensions of the members of the examining faculty.

Smollett passed the examination, however, and was put upon the waiting list. This waiting list was in charge of the Secretary of the Board, and the chief requisite for being at the top of the list was the presentation of a gift of three pounds to the Secretary. Smollett, however, lacked the three pounds, and so waited nearly a year for his appointment. At last he sailed as surgeon's mate on board "The Thunderer" which was to join the English fleet against Spanish shipping and Spanish towns in the West Indies. Carlyle says that among all the members of this ill-fated expedition, one of the least significant was Tobias Smollett, and yet almost the only profit from this great expenditure in men, arms and ships came later from the pen of the man "who took portraiture of English seamanhood with due grimness and due fidelity". Carlyle further says that Smollett at this time was "a proud soft hearted though somewhat stern visaged, caustic and intelligent young gentleman . . . apt to be caustic in speech having sorrows of his own under lock and key".

Smollett, himself, describes the quarters of a surgeon's mate as follows: " . . . my friend Thomson carried me down into the cock-pit, which is the place allotted for the habitation of the surgeon's mates; and when he had shown me their berth, . . . I was filled with astonishment and horror. We descended by divers ladders to a place as dark as a dungeon, which I understood was immersed several feet under water, being immediately above the hold. I had no sooner approached this dismal gulf, than my nose

was saluted with an intolerable stench, of putrified cheese and rancid butter, that issued from an apartment at the foot of the ladder, where . . . was the ship's steward."

His actual introduction to his medical duties aboard a man-of-war he describes in the following: "At seven o'clock in the evening, Morgan visited the sick, and having ordered what was proper for each, I assisted Thomson in making up his prescriptions; but when I followed him with the medicines into the sick berth or hospital, and observed the situations of the patients, I was much less surprised that people should die on board, than that any sick person should recover. Here I saw about fifty miserable distempered wretches, suspended in rows, so huddled one upon another, that not more than fourteen inches space was allotted for each with his bed and bedding; and deprived of the light of the day, as well as of fresh air; breathing nothing but a noisome atmosphere of the morbid steams exhaling from their own excrements and diseased bodies, devoured with vermin hatched in the filth that surrounded them, and destitute of every convenience necessary for people in that helpless condition."

We should note, in passing, that this was the day of the notorious press-gang in England, the results of which practice made the life of the English seamen so utterly miserable that the Navy could only be kept at its fighting strength by thus forcing men into the service. There were, of course, captains and ships' doctors who cared for their men and were loved by them, but it is equally true that there were others who were most inhuman in the treatment of their men. Smollett, in "Roderick Random", describes the latter type. When the captain was handed the sick list with sixty-one names on it he swore that it was too large and that there should be no sick on the vessel while he was in command. To this end he ordered the sick to come to the quarter-deck to be examined by him and the surgeon who was the captain's "echo". "The first who came under his cognizance was a poor fellow just freed of a fever, which had weakened him so much, that he could hardly stand. Mr. Mackshane (for that was the Doctor's name) having felt his pulse, protested he was as well as any man in the world; and the captain delivered him over to the boatswain's mate, with orders that he should receive a round dozen at the gangway immediately, for counterfeiting himself sick: but before the discipline could be exe-

cuted, the man dropped down on the deck, and had well-nigh perished under the hands of the executioner.

"The next patient to be considered, labored under a quartan ague, and being then in his interval of health, discovered no other symptoms of distemper than a pale meagre countenance, and emaciated body; upon which, he was declared fit for duty, and turned over to the boatswain: but being resolved to disgrace the doctor, died upon the forecastle next day, during his cold fit.

"The third complained of a pleuritic stitch, and spitting of blood; for which Doctor Mackshane prescribed exercise at the pump, to promote expectoration: but whether this was improper for one in his situation, or that it was used to excess, I know not; for in less than half an hour he was suffocated with a deluge of blood that issued from his lungs."

In 1741, while his ship was in port in Jamaica, Smollett became so disgusted with the Navy Medical Service that he resigned. He was then just twenty years old. For a time he practiced medicine among the Europeans on the Island, and it was at this time that he met Miss Ann Lascelles, a Creole beauty and the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner. He continued in practice here until about 1745, when he returned to England, in order to set up practice in London. However, this was not attended with any success. His biographer, Hannay, says, "Without a degree and with no London connections a legitimate London practice was not to be obtained and even if there had been no honesty in the way Smollett was a great deal too proud, too quarrelsome and scornful for the trade of quack." It was at this time in his career that Smollett gradually began to turn his attention to literature.

In 1747, he married Miss Lascelles. One child was born to them, a daughter, Elizabeth, who was the delight of her father. He writes: "Many a time do I stop my task and betake me to a game of romps with Betty while my wife looks on smiling, and longing in her heart to join the sport, then back to the cursed round of duty."

In 1748, Smollett published "The Adventures of Roderick Random", which almost immediately gave him a place among English authors equal to that occupied by Fielding and Richardson. He now entered upon an extremely active literary life, but did not entirely neglect his medical work. In 1750, he obtained from

the University of Aberdeen the degree of Doctor of Medicine, and the following year, he went to Paris, where his friend, John Moore, was studying and working in the hospitals. It is probable that Smollett was more interested in the literary men and the sights of Paris than in the work in which his friend was engaged. Nevertheless, on his return to England in 1752, he went to Bath, in Somersetshire, and here made his third and last attempt to establish a medical practice. Bath, at this time, was at the height of its fame as a health resort and watering-place. Forty years before this time, Bath had been a ragged village, which hapened to contain hot springs. The story of its rise into prominence as a health resort, largely through the efforts of the celebrated "Beau" Nash, is well known. It is said that people came to Bath because Nash made it comfortable. He allowed it to be immoral enough to be interesting and yet good enough to preserve a coating of respectability. Watchful old ladies brought their daughters to Bath on husband-hunting expeditions. Young men came in search of an heiress to wed. Rheumatic old ladies and gouty old gentlemen also came, hoping that the celebrated waters would improve their ailments, and knowing that the gossip and scandal which there abounded would make the hours interesting.

It was at this place that Smollett made his only real scientific contribution to medicine, which was entitled "An Essay on the External Use of Water with Particular Remarks Upon the Present Methods of Using the Mineral Waters in Bath in Somersetshire and a Plan for Rendering Them More Agreeable, Soft and Efficacious". At the end of his paper, he reaches the conclusion that any good water supply would do as well as the celebrated waters of Bath. It is not difficult to imagine how agreeable this statement was to those physicians and people of Bath who were making their living from those who came there for the waters.

Smollett comments on the hygienic condition of the baths in the character of Bramble:

TO DR. LEWIS

Dear Dick:

I have done with the waters; therefor your advice comes a day too late. I grant that physic is no mystery of your making. I know it is a mystery in its own nature, and like other mysteries requires a strong gulp of faith to make it

go down. Two days ago I went into the King's Bath, by the advice of our friend Ch——, in order to clear the strainer of the skin, for the benefit of a free perspiration; and the first object that saluted my eye was a child, full of scrofulous ulcers, carried in the arms of one of the guides, under the very noses of the bathers. I was so shocked at the sight that I retired immediately with indignation and disgust. Suppose the matter of those ulcers, floating in the water, comes in contact with my skin, when the pores are all open, I would ask you what would be the consequence? Good heavens, the very thought makes my blood run cold. We know not what sores may be running into the waters while we are bathing, and what sort of matter we may thus imbibe; the king's evil, the scurvy, the cancer and the pox; and no doubt the heat will render the virus the more volatile and penetrating . . .

After all, if the intention is no more than to wash the skin I am convinced that the simple element is more effectual than any water impregnated with salt and iron; which being astringent will certainly contract the pores, and leave a kind of crust upon the surface of the body. But I am now as much afraid of drinking as of bathing; for, after a long conversation with the doctor, about the construction of the pump and the cistern, it is very far from being clear with me, that the patients in the pump room don't swallow the scourgings of the bathers. I can't help suspecting, that there is, or may be some regurgitation from the bath into the cistern of the pump. In that case, what a delicate beverage is every day quaffed by the drinkers, medicated with the sweat and dirt, and dandruff, and the abominable discharges of various kinds, from twenty different diseased bodies, parboiling in the kettle below.

This final attempt at medical practice proved to be a failure, and in the same year, Smollett turned his entire attention to literary work.

Many reasons have been given for Smollett's failure as a medical practitioner, but the chief reason probably lies in the fact that he preferred writing and the society of literary men. Smollett made enemies with great ease and this may have hampered his medical career. His caustic tongue and vitriolic sarcasm had few equals among his contemporaries. It may be said of him that he dearly loved his friends, but he loved a good enemy even better.

The greatest contribution of Tobias Smollett to medicine may be found in his writings, particularly those which warned the public against the tricks and falsehoods of quacks and pseudopractitioners. His criticisms of medical essays and publications were also valuable. He was quick to give ample and full praise where it was deserved, and he was exceedingly harsh and severe in his treatment of the false and ignorant among medical publications. Osler's lines after a visit to Oliver Wendell Holmes apply equally well to Smollett. He writes: "Literature has often been enriched by those who have de-

served medicine for the muses. But to drink deeply at Pierian springs unfits and when the thirst is truly divine should unfit a man for the worrying rounds of practice. It is shocking to think that had Oliver Goldsmith secured the confidence of the old women in Bankside Southwark we should probably never have known the Vicar or Tony Lumpkin. Still worse to think what we should have lost had Keats passed on from a successful career at Guy's to obtain even a distinguished position as a London surgeon. Happily such men soon kick free from the traces in which the average doctor trots to success."

Among the friends of Tobias Smollett were many medical practitioners. His aid to William Smellie in the famous "Treatise on Midwifery" was responsible in no small degree for the influence which Smellie has had in obstetrics. Like many other literary artists, Smollett was often in financial difficulty, and on these occasions he was sometimes aided by his more successful medical friends. In 1760, he wrote to William Hunter:

DEAR HUNTER:

I have been hedging and lurching these six weeks in expectation of that cursed ship from Jamacia which is at last arrived without letter or remittance . . . I am at present in absolute necessity of eight or ten pieces without which I can no longer answer the occasions of my family. This declaration is by God Himself like wormwood and brimstone to me . . .

TS. SMOLLETT.

Dr. Hunter replied with a remittance of fifty pounds. Smollett thanked him, in part as follows:

Dear Sir:

I am much affected by the last mark of your friendship which I received the day before I set out on my journey and hope you will give me leave to enjoy it in my own way . . .

At the foot of this letter is a formal promise to pay the fifty pounds back when required. And on the back is an endorsement by William Hunter which runs:

London 13th May 1766.

In case of my death I desire my executors will not make any demand upon Dr. Smollett because I sent the money to him as a present never meaning to take it again.

WILLIAM HUNTER.

In 1763, Smollett's daughter died, and his health, which had never been good, began to fail. He suffered from rheumatism,



asthma and gout, together with a long-standing ulcer on his hand. In a letter to John Hunter in 1771, written from Italy, he says: "With respect to myself I have nothing to say but that if I can prevail upon my wife to execute my last will, you shall receive my poor carcass in a box after I am dead—to be placed among your rarities. I am already so dry and emaciated that I may pass for an Egyptian Mummy without any other preparation than some pitch and painted linen."

He died October 21, 1771, at the age of fifty, worn out by work and disease. He was buried in the cemetery at Leghorn. Five monuments with epitaphs in English, Latin, Greek and Italian were erected around his grave. Perhaps more characteristic than any of these are the self-estimating words which he put in the mouth of a sailor in one of his novels:

"Ah, God help thee, more sail than ballast, Rory."